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Binumarien, (Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Afaqinna ufa (ethnonym), Binumarien (exonym)
Language Family:	Kainantu, Trans New Guinea
ISO 639-3 Code:	bjr
Glottolog Code:	binu1245
Population:	1,200 (self-reported in 2018)
Location:	-6.2895, 146.0892
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 6a

Summary

Binumarien is a Papuan language spoken by an ethnic group of the same name in the Kainantu District of the Eastern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea. According to local estimates, the language has approximately 1,200 speakers. The Binumarien language is spoken in one village with this name. The language community has increased enormously over the past decades; today children in the village grow up with Binumarien as their first language.

1. Overview

The Binumarien people live in several hamlets in a valley located in Kainantu District, near the easternmost corner of the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (McKaughan 1973). In their own language, the Binumarien people refer to the area in which they live as *Afaqinnaasa* and to their language as *Afaqinna ufa* (*ufa* meaning ‘talk’ or ‘language’). When speaking Tok Pisin, the lingua franca of the area, Binumarien people refer to themselves and their territory as ‘Binumarien’.

According to Oatridge & Oatridge (1973a), the exonym ‘Binumarien’ was used under the Australian administration (1949-1975), and is derived from *Pinumareena*, the name of a former village. *Pinumareena* is also the name of one of the four Binumarien clans.



Map 1. Location of the current Binumarien village. Abonamu and Atuka are Gadsup villages. Ken is where the school is located.

For larger map see page 117

The Binumarien people grow sweet potatoes, yams, taro, bananas, and green vegetables as the main components of their diet. Some keep pigs and chickens, and many Binumarien regularly hunt in the forest for meat; their main cash crop is coffee. The Binumarien are Protestant Christians, and there are five churches in the village, each for a different denomination. Children from the Binumarien village, and some children from the nearby Gadsup villages of Atuka and Abonamu, go to school in Ken, a hamlet in the valley of Binumarien. In 2018, a new school building was constructed, which offers classes up to grade eight.

The number of Binumarien speakers has increased enormously over recent decades. McKaughan (1973) wrote that Binumarien was spoken by 117 people living in three small villages, while Oatridge & Oatridge (1973a) commented that the Binumarien used to be more numerous, according to the memories of older people, but that tribal fighting and malaria had greatly reduced their numbers. Since then, the Binumarien established more stable relations with the surrounding tribes, and moved to a higher altitude, making them less susceptible to malaria (Oates 1992). According to Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2019), the Binumarien language was spoken by 520

people in 2000. During my fieldwork in 2018, community members reported a total number of 1,200 speakers. It is the dominant language in most households, and is used in community gatherings and in church services; children grow up with Binumarien as their first language. In addition, they often know other languages spoken by family members from outside the village. People who marry into the community are expected to learn the language, and many Binumarien are fluent in one of the neighbouring languages, especially Gadsup, and also in Tok Pisin, the lingua franca of the area. Officially, English is the language of instruction at school, but I have not met anyone from the Binumarien village whose English went beyond a very basic level.

Cowan (1976) reports that the Binumarien language community uses a whistled language, which however has remained unstudied until now. I found that only socially acceptable for men and small children to use whistled speech, which is called *fooka*. Binumarien is a tonal language, which means that pitch is used to make lexical distinctions. The pitch of whistled speech emulates the pitches used in spoken language.

Binumarien has been classified as a Papuan language. The term ‘Papuan’ refers to languages spoken in eastern Indonesia, Timor Leste, and the Pacific that are not part of the Austronesian family (Foley 1986). Binumarien is surrounded by the (Papuan) Gadsup language to the south and west and the (Austronesian) Adzera language in the north and east (see Figure 2). The area in which Kambaira is spoken borders on Binumarien in the southeast, but this language is almost extinct (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2019). Binumarien is most closely related to North and South Tairora, spoken beyond the Gadsup area in the south (Oatridge & Oatridge 1973a). Although the classification of many Papuan languages and language groups is yet to be determined, there is a consensus view that Binumarien belongs to the Tairora branch of the Kainantu languages, which in turn are members of the Trans New Guinea family (Wurm 1975; Xiao 1990; Hammarström 2012; Pawley & Hammarström 2018).



Figure 2. Binumarien and neighbouring languages.

2. Research

At present, no research is being conducted on the Binumarien language. The first study began with Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) members Desmond and Jenny Oatridge, who lived in the Binumarien village from 1959 to 1986. They were involved in the development of an orthography for the language in cooperation with the speakers, and worked on a translation of the Bible New Testament, which was published in 1983 (Oates 1992). Oatridge and Oatridge published short articles on Binumarien phonology (1973a), noun affixes (1973b) and final verb morphology (1965). Hage & Hawkes (1975) is an article on Binumarien colour terms, and Hawkes (1978) is an anthropological study of the concept of Binumarien ‘big men’. Bee (1966) is a grammar sketch of 27 pages based on the findings of Oatridge and Oatridge. The sketch by Bee contains much of the information that was later published in articles by Oatridge and Oatridge.

The most recent study of Binumarien is Dasselaar (2019a), an MA thesis which I wrote at Leiden University, discussing the tone system in noun phrases and switch-reference marking on verbs. The thesis includes several transcribed texts and a small Binumarien-English dictionary. Dasselaar (2019b) is a plenary talk on the tone system within noun phrases. I collected the data for my research during fieldwork of two months in total, spread over six visits. I interviewed people of various ages, mostly men, communicating with them in Tok Pisin. After leaving Papua New Guinea, I had two video calls with speakers of Binumarien in March and June 2019, with the aim of running a last check on the data collected in the field. Recordings of the texts, along with transcriptions are to be found in the SIL-PNG Language & Culture Archive.

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